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Friends, Foes Draw a Sketch Of CIA Chief

President Reagan's most controversial appointee is also the most secretive. He is William J. Casey, who abandoned his roost amid the glass canyons of finance to head the CIA.

With an obsessive if sometimes fumbling dedication, he promotes the kind of secret government the CIA favors. He has put up a dogged fight in the back rooms for the expansion of our counterintelligence and counterinsurgency operations, the better to battle the communists at their own game.

Usually, information about Casey, 70, surfaces only when he's involved in some controversy on which he can't keep the lid. So I assigned my associate Dale Van Atta to dig into Casey's background and character. Over several months, he interviewed Casey's friends and enemies in and out of the CIA.

The composite picture they etched is of a loner who operates out of his hat; who lives in a continuous state of crisis; whose mind is encased in a Republican hard shell; who talks of American-Soviet relations, for example, in terms of "showdown," but

who has surprising tolerance for the views of others. Here are closed-door glimpses of the CIA director:

- Casey doesn't run the CIA. He's a lone wolf who prefers to leave the detail work and public relations chores to his deputy director.

- His style in clothes can best be described as "contemporary disheveled." He sometimes falls asleep at briefings. His typical speech pattern—mumbling in a rich New York accent—has led to an in-house joke that he's the only CIA boss who doesn't need a voice scrambler on his telephone.

- Since he dislikes minding the store at CIA headquarters in Langley, he is frequently on the road. In a speech to CIA employees Casey boasted that in his first six months on the job he had "traveled to Europe, Asia, Central America and the Middle East and met with over 20 station chiefs in those areas."

- Many sources agreed that Casey has improved intelligence analysis by allowing competing views to appear prominently. Under his predecessors, dissenting viewpoints were relegated to brief footnotes.

- A bedrock political conservative, Casey is not inflexible. He's intellectually honest enough to change his hard-line Republican outlook if there's solid evidence to refute it.

- He has a habit of sending his subordinates clippings from odd publications that his right-wing

friends thrust on him along with notes asking why the CIA didn't know about this or that.

- Casey loves the covert-action side of his job. "The cowboys down in the ranks will send up a hare-brained proposal, and the next thing you know they're in his office plotting with him," complained one source. Other sources expressed concern that this sidesteps the checks and balances designed to prevent preposterous clandestine operations.

- Casey is an unabashed political animal. It was only because he realized the political damage it might do Reagan that he agreed to put his financial holdings in a blind trust.

- He dumped his spymaster-friend, Max Hugel, not because of the damaging admissions in taped conversations of Hugel's financial dealings, but because of Hugel's salty language. Casey was afraid the tapes would be heard by the president and Nancy Reagan, who would have been offended.

- Casey can be petty about people with whom he doesn't get along. One source insists it was at Casey's personal order that the admiral's flag was flown upside down at a farewell ceremony for Adm. Bobby Inman—a calculated snub.

But probably no one knows the real Casey behind the blinking, owlish face. There is a wariness and tenseness in him, a sense of beleaguerment.